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<http://wyofile.com/dustin/epa-again-delays-pavillion-groundwater-investigation-related-to-fracking/>

EPA again delays Pavillion groundwater investigation related to fracking

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has again delayed action in its highly controversial investigation into contaminated drinking water in Pavillion, Wyoming.

WyoFile obtained a document scheduled to be published in the Federal Register on January 11, 2013, announcing the extension of the public comment period for EPA Region 8's "Investigation of Ground Water Contamination near Pavillion, Wyoming" to September 30, 2013.

Public comment was first initiated in December 2011.



Tanks hold natural gas condensate and mark the spot of producing gas wells in the Pavillion field, in Fremont County, Wyo., in the heart of the Wind River Indian Reservation. The Environmental Protection Agency said it found chemicals that are used in gas drilling in water wells near this site. (Abrahm Lustgarten/ProPublica)

That draft report, released publicly in December 2011, alleged that chemicals commonly associated with hydraulic fracturing — or “fracking” — indeed contributed to contaminated drinking water in the tiny, rural farming community.

The report set off a firestorm of criticism from both Wyoming officials and Pavillion natural gas field operator EnCana Oil & Gas USA, taking aim at the EPA’s methodology, data and conclusions. In the controversy, a scientific peer review required to finalize the draft report has been continually delayed.

This week’s news of yet another delay further frustrated stakeholders on all sides of the issue, including some Pavillion area residents who believe the EPA’s investigation — and conclusions mentioned in the draft report — is the most reliable information on the matter.

“What it really means for us is months and months of waiting and still being exposed to impacts that we’ve suffered all along and having no resolution,” Pavillion area rancher John Fenton told WyoFile. “Go ahead and extend public comment, but allow the peer review go forward. I’m trying to find out who requested this.”

A spokesman for EnCana Oil & Gas USA said the company was equally disappointed.

“This issue goes to our reputation and we take this very seriously and we don’t beleive the issues in Pavillion are related to our oil and gas operation,” EnCana spokesman Doug Hock told WyoFile. “It’s a disservice to us and a disservice to people of Pavillion and to the state of Wyoming.”

Hock said EnCana had prepared several third party reports from geologists, hydrologists and other experts to submit to EPA next week. The reports essentially are a critique of EPA’s groundwater investigation, which EnCana believes has been proven scientifically invalid.

That question of validity, however, cannot be officially answered until — and unless — a peer review weighs in on the matter.



Jeffrey Locker stands next to a natural gas well behind his home near Pavillion. (Dustin Bleizeffer/WyoFile – click to enlarge)

The EPA issued this statement today; “During this time EPA will continue its public outreach activities including meeting with key stakeholders and posting additional technical information on the agency’s website. This extension will allow the public additional opportunity to comment on EPA’s draft report and the latest round of sampling conducted by EPA and USGS. The Agency will take into account new data, further stakeholder input, and public comment as it continues to review the status of the Pavillion investigation and considers options for moving forward.”

In meantime, dozens of families are left without answers as to why their drinking water is fouled.

“We have all this work and it’s not being allowed to continue on through this peer review process and come to some conclusion,” said Fenton.

“This really shows that the EPA is running scared,” said Simon Lomax, Denver-based research director for the industry trade association Energy In Depth. Lomax said the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Geological Survey and Wyoming’s Department of Environmental Quality have all reviewed EPA’s draft report and each has found fault with it. The industry has compiled a list of such critiques ([click here](#)).

Lomax said EPA should withdraw the report, abandon its deep monitoring wells, “then EPA should go back to the original purpose of its Pavillion work — sampling shallow domestic water wells to determine the real cause of the taste and odor complaints.”

The state has pitched in money to provide cisterns as a temporary fix, although few homeowners have committed to having them installed because they still have to pay for water. The state has also launched planning efforts for a long-term water supply solution.

EnCana is still providing some water on a temporary basis. The company continues to operate about 145 natural gas wells in the Pavillion field, and says it has not performed any drilling or fracking operations since 2007. This past year, a potential buyer backed out of negotiations to purchase the field.

“That buyer decided, because of the ongoing issues with EPA, decided not to go through with that transaction,” said Hock. “It’s not a core asset for us.”

— Dustin Bleizeffer is WyoFile editor-in-chief. Reach him at 307-577-6069 or dustin@wyofile.com. Follow Dustin on Twitter [@DBleizeffer](#).

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